

Fiction merged with documentary and the film was permeated by that urgency of capturing what was happening, by the feeling that all was fleeting, like youth, or hope, or the construction of the subway, which was heading for completion and had to be caught on film then or never. Cinema and the moment, Carla Bolito's face, her life, the way the character was portrayed, it all converges to that moment of the shooting and that moment of the city and of the country, the moment of light, the moment in which we are all alive. Life as conflict, as tension, as crisis.

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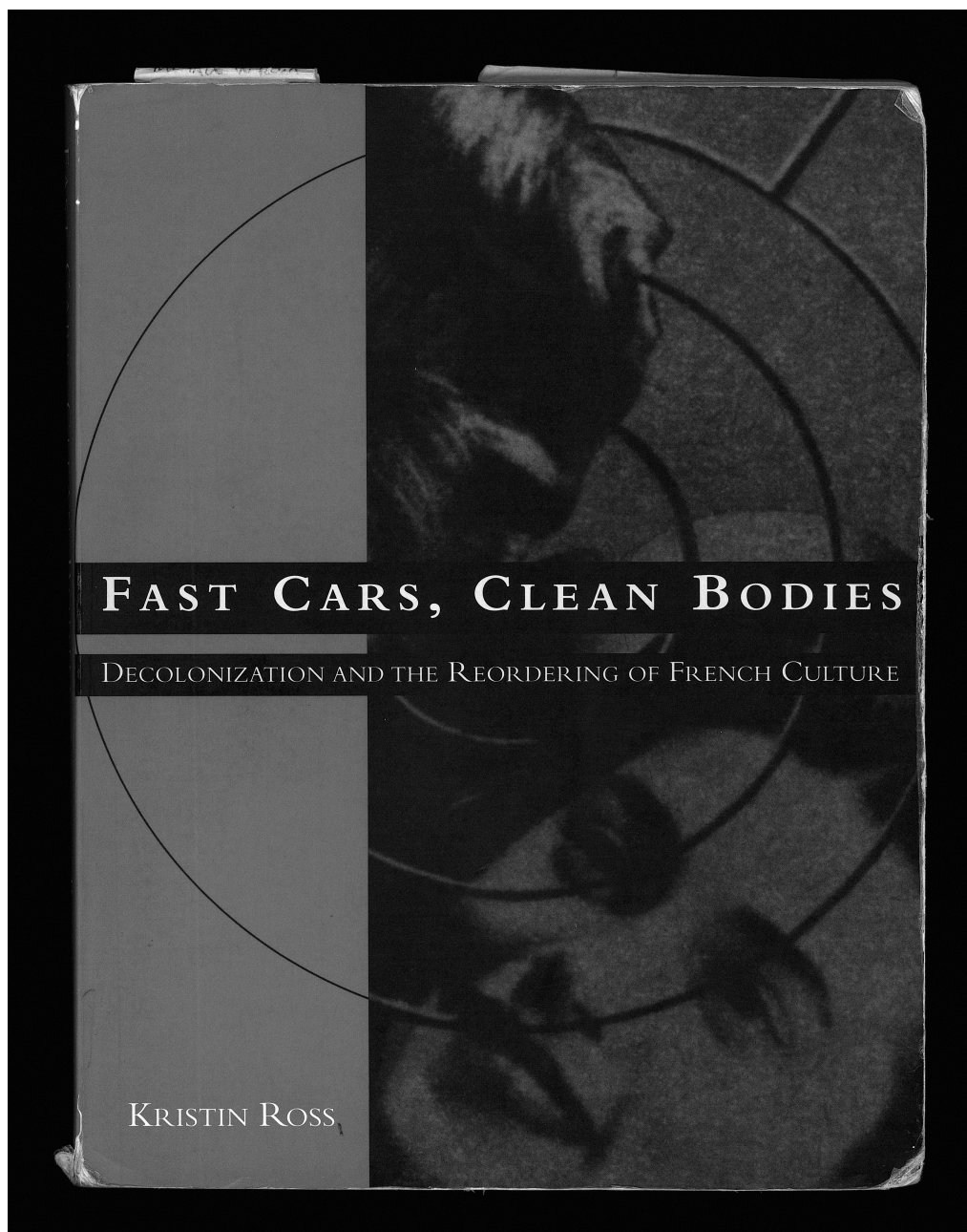
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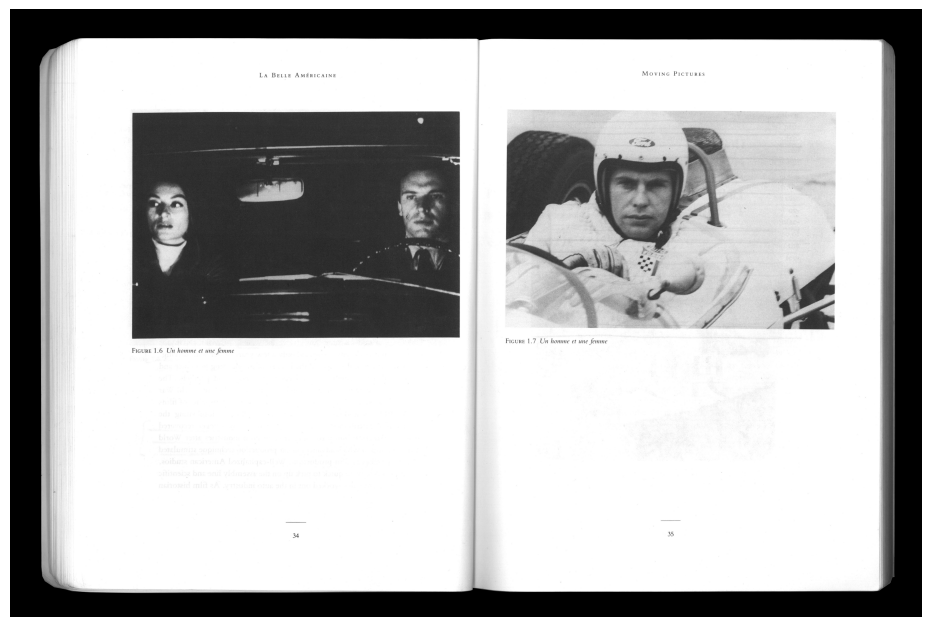
ESSAYS	lost in translation — reality as fake, image as reality Francisco Ferreira	2
	architectures in the same shot — construction of the filmic space Jorge Gorostiza	12
	make-believe america: wim wenders's dream Pedro Aires	20
REVIEWS	moving pictures, changing cultures — on the book <i>fast cars, clean bodies</i> Francisco Ferreira	30
	haus tugendhat — from the film by dieter reifarth Pedro Bandeira	36
	looking forward JACK	44
DOSSIER	verdes anos 90 Jorge Leitão Ramos	50
	a not that special day A. Roma Torres	52
	what happened to me after corte de cabelo?... Joaquim Sapinho	56
	corte de cabelo — how soon is now? Francisco Ferreira	64
	nothing but the girl Luis Urbano	76
POSTER	corte de cabelo, today Carlos Corais	
INTERVIEW	contradictions and complexities An interview with Manuel Graça Dias	81
ARCHITECTURE FICTION	fallen angels, wong kar-wai 1995 Filipe Silva	97

moving pictures, changing cultures on the book *fast cars, clean bodies*

by Francisco Ferreira



*Fast Cars, Clean Bodies — Decolonization
and the Reordering of French Culture,*
Kristin Ross, 261 pp., The MIT Press, 1995



*Fast Cars, Clean Bodies —
Decolonization and the Reordering of
French Culture, Kristin Ross, p.34/35*

Pierre

Je voudrais vous demander quelque chose... on m'a dit que des fois les communistes, ils aidaient les soldats à désertier... c'est vrai?

Mme. Alvarez

Ça c'est arrivé... mais aujourd'hui c'est différent, l'Algérie va être indépendante.

Pierre

Ça je m'en fout... ce que je veux c'est plus retourner là bas... c'est pour ça que je me suis marié...

Les Roseaux Sauvages,
André Téchiné, 1994

Postwar western societies became deeply enamoured with the seduction of the ever evolving and positivistic *everyday life*; they became entangled in a kind of belief — disguised as an act of conscience — on the new, optimistic zeitgeist. In *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, Kristin Ross addresses this phenomenon as the result of a shift of perception towards reality, created under the guise of modernization, an epitome standing for a change in industrial production and its objectives which came to introduce radically new consumption patterns and *cultural habits*. Although the book is specifically based on the French postwar social, political, cultural and economic changes, it is, nonetheless, interesting to also acknowledge it as a study that inherently includes in its undertone the spectre of a Europe to come, along with the laying out of its cultural liaisons with America and its struggles with the processes of decolonization. The story Kristin Ross so eloquently conveys is a very specific and thorough account of the process of readjustment of postwar French historical identity, an identity reconstructed explicitly by overlapping both France's modernization and decolonization processes. This leads to the acknowledgement and analysis of the classic opposition between interior and exterior, here seen through a kaleidoscopic lens of disciplines, facts and testimonies.

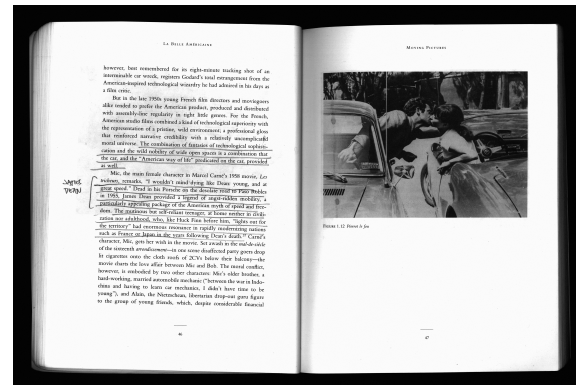
One of those disciplines is cinema, which, along with literature, Kristin Ross extensively uses in order to identify and describe the social and political contexts of midcentury postwar France, but also to bring to the fore the character, the drive and the expectations of people, as well as the presence, the aura and the shapes of the new modern technological apparatuses. This allows the author to articulate the innermost desires of the individual and their political relevance with the potential development of the social fabric of an entire country involved in an evolutive economic process that is entangled with the questioning of its own identity as a nation. In *the postwar period*, the author writes, at the end of the book's introduction, *realist fiction and film offered a critique of official representations of a uniformly prosperous France, surging forward into American-style patterns of consumption and mass culture*. In this sense, the films that run across the book — which, given the period in question, rely quite heavily on the *Nouvelle Vague* — bring an interesting social and political input to the representation of French society and French Culture during the 1950s and 1960s, but also claims for itself a preponderance that is explicable for it being, also, a modern medium that, more than merely capturing a glimpse of time is actually capable of recreating both its cultural environment and *durée*. From the dramatic portrait of youth's uneasiness in Marcel Carné's *Les Tricheurs*, through Claude Chabrol's women's desperate desire for life in *Les Bonnes Femmes*, along with Jean-Luc Godard's staging of rebellions, disasters and revolutions in films like *A Bout de Souffle*, *Weekend* or *Pierrot Le Fou*, to Jacques Tati's bittersweet comedies on the simulacra of modernity in *Jour de Fête*, *Mon Oncle*, or *Playtime*, film becomes both a testimony of the reality under observation and a means to better acknowledge the making of the cultural context towards which the book's discourse is aimed.

Throughout four main chapters, the book addresses several issues: from the allure of car ownership and movement in *La Belle Américaine*, through to the functionalism and fluidity of both private (the domestic) and social (the public) space under the guise of the female presence and relevance in its subsequent chapter *Hygiène and Modernization*, on to the relation of forces between genders and identities in *Couples*, towards the definition of the technocratic social and working subject — the *cadre* — arising from the differences and articulations between the structuralist intellect and the revolutionary, but also pragmatic, engagement with reality, in its last chapter, *New Men*. Each of these chapters is populated by a myriad of real and fictional characters that build up a very interesting construct obtained through the overlaps and parallels of the historical and the cultural. From Françoise Sagan to Françoise Giroud and Simone de Beauvoir, from Cécile in *Bonjour Tristesse* to Laurence in *Les Belles Images*, women are an exemplary subject of the political and social ongoing revolutions and contexts. The motorization of France, its overall everyday modernization, from the home to the city to the *campagne*, is thus approached simultaneously with a standing of ground by women (from the housewife to the working woman) and against the painful and contradictory background of the Algerian colonial war — although usually deemed, by the *dominant contemporary French per-*

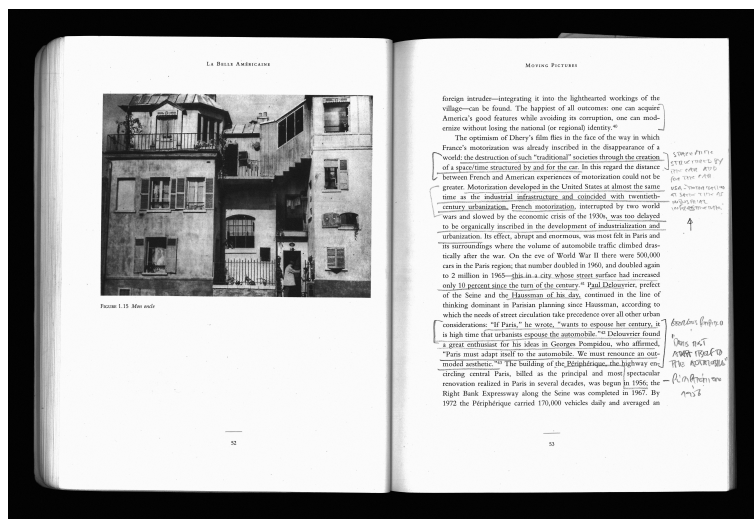
spective, as it is noted by Ross, as an *exterior* experience, a sort of temporal exception or tale. It is through the overlap of all these different issues, themes, subjects and scales that the book truly becomes unique in the way it actually *tells a story*, one that nevertheless achieves an objective cultural texture, either to be read as a theoretical construction per se, or as a historical device that comes to inform on contemporary times. And although the main subjects with which the author deals along the book are, in fact, the social and political context and change in France during the 1950s and the 1960s, these are treated as cultural issues, rather than autonomous, abstract structures over which cultural events may or may not take place. It is also in this sense that every literary, cinematic or philosophical reference or referent appearing within the narrative Kristin Ross so carefully weaves, becomes a social and political actor, not just a cultural illustration. Thus Sagan's writings become a reflection of her own love for cars and speed, a reference that comes as an emphasis on the *work of producing the domestic* or "*intimacy*" *myth of the car*, as stated by Ross, a myth that at the same time drastically changed the structure of everyday life through the reordering of the city's spatiality but also the perception of that same spatiality, *the blurred sensation* the author alludes to when also commenting on Godard's statements on *Pierrot le Fou*. In a similar way, Baudrillard's rhetoric on the housekeeper's obsession over cleanliness and functionalism becomes entangled with Mme. Arpel's line, describing her modernist suburban house, in which *tout communie*, while in the third chapter, the crossed discourses between literature (Beauvoir and Perec) and the everyday life magazines (L'Express, Elle) establish quite interesting dichotomies between the way France acknowledges its own autonomy and the way the Algerian war comes to shape that acknowledgement. Finally, in *New Men*, the debate turns into the proclamation of the *new*, shifting the focus from *its standard avant-gardist location* — found in the emergence of New Wave Cinema or in the *Nouveau Roman* — towards the notion of the "*new man*", of a *new construction of (male) subjectivity, celebrated, analysed and debated* within the (also) new organizational roles to be found in several social activities where the new *jeunes cadres*, either revolutionary or *structural*, would become the face and hand of technocratic intricacies.

Although without any direct references to it — actually the word does not even appear throughout the book — architecture still makes its way into this story, through the use of terms as *domestic, hygiene, functionalism* or *standardised housing*. However, it is when Ross addresses the idea of *society as city* that the presence of architectural and urban discourse becomes more engaged with the book's subjects. The realisation of this *new image* by the Situationists and Henri Lefebvre — both quite relevant within urban contemporary studies — or by novelists such as Georges Perec, Simone de Beauvoir or Christiane Rochefort, comes to imply, Ross argues, *the beginning of a whole new thematics of inside and outside, of inclusion in, and exclusion from, a positively valued modernity. Cities possess a center and "banlieus", and citizens, those on the interior, deciding who among the insiders should be expelled, and whether or not to open their doors to those on the outside*. As we know from the histories of mod-

ern architecture, the *New* and the *City* were in fact its *real* objects of desire, from Ludwig Hilberseimer's analysis, through Le Corbusier's designs and writings, on to the Smithsons' critique of modernity's urban methodologies in the late 1950s; be that as it may, the modern city, in its most canonical ideology and belief, was to be one of thorough and objective spatial and social organization, in which architecture and nature would engulf Man in a limitless landscape of optimum design and hierarchy of services and pleasures, either public, domestic or labour oriented. It was, indeed, a city thought as a social and political reorganization, one of democratic and standardized values, one of classless and happy individuals, that upheld elusive spatial frontiers which would come to dilute the very notions of interior and exterior — recalling Mme. Arpel's words in Tati's *Mon Oncle*, in the modern city *tout communie*. It is thus interesting and welcoming to find in the book's narrative the account of the Paris renovations initiated in the mid 1950s under the guise of *Hygiene and Security* — the former term often used in the modern architectural discourse — which would, in fact, use these types of jargon in order to perform a socially and politically motivated segregation. And although *modernity and hygiene served as a pretext for the demolition of entire quarters* within the traditional city (let's not forget, *à propos*, an energetic Le Corbusier presenting his *Plan Voisin* by scrapping a portion of inner Paris over a map and replacing it with his *Ville Radieuse* modernist skyscrapers, in Pierre Chennal's documentary film from 1930 *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*), dystopian manifestations of a supposed new and modern city would in fact take place in the suburbs, the *banlieus*, where a standardized design and construction would produce a proliferation of housing buildings with built-in commodities and appliances, that in the end would serve more as alienated social condensers, and less as articulated, *modern* extensions of the existing city. We now know how modernity's legacy and its continuous critique of the city — either still modern, postmodern or neomodern — has



Fast Cars, Clean Bodies — Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture, Kristin Ross p.46/47; 52/53



been swaying us between historicist revivals and high-tech, ultra-designed manifestations, pushing simultaneously towards and against the *scare* of the generic. The socio-urban issues raised by Kristin Ross in the context of France's decolonization process and its immigration policies, resonate today in a magnificent way with several cultural *assertions*, but mainly, on a political level, with the territorial concerns of certain European and North American societies and populations. And in this way, the book becomes, probably even more today than at the time of its first edition in 1995, relevant and important in the cultural debate around the behaviour of societies (as the title of the book also indicates, all comes down to a matter of culture and cultural behaviour) towards the presence of those other cultures that at some point come to face them, either in a supplicant way or in a menacing one — and that, in correlation, become engaged with the ever changing shapes of the political world and its designs and organizations. And what better way to acknowledge and reveal such shape-shifting forms of reality than through its most natural creative representations, be it film, literature or even architecture?

In the year before the publishing of *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, a film entitled *Les Roseaux Sauvages*, by French director André Téchiné, tells a coming of age tale of sexual discoveries and political confrontations in Villeneuve-sur-Lot — a town in the interior south of France — with the last stages of the war in Algeria as background. The city is far away in this film. Two of its main characters, François and Maïté, go through their days talking about books and films while becoming more and more politically and sexually implicated with Serge and Henri, the other half of this foursome story. The film starts with a whistling sound, François and Maïté entering the frame, François talking about a film. Immediately after, they are at Pierre's wedding, Serge's brother, dressed in uniform, three days before returning to war. Within what feels like a common wedding party, we sense a particular tension when, dancing with his former school teacher, Mme.

Alvarez, Pierre asks for help in order to escape the war. A mute violence will unfold from here on throughout the film, one that will bring the characters to eventually come forward with all their doubts and ambiguities about their identity and place in the political and social world. As in Kristin Ross's book, the spectre of the Algerian war tends to influence the particular and personal events of the characters, thus putting into motion a very specific connection between the cultural and political changes of France and the personal emancipation and affirmation of the characters into adult life. At the end of the film — as in its beginning — a whistle is heard while three of the characters leave the frame. The ending of the war is near and, potentially, *fast cars and clean bodies* await them.